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Blended Learning as Helping Tool to Enhance Student Learning

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reshaped the global educational landscape, compelling institutions to rapidly adopt distance learning strategies. In Algeria, where face-to-face instruction has long been the standard, this transition presented a range of new challenges. This article examines the effectiveness of blended learning—a hybrid model that integrates both distance and in-person instruction—within the context of Algerian higher education. To evaluate its impact, a survey was conducted among Master's students in Translation at the University of Mascara, using a questionnaire followed by a descriptive analysis of the collected data focusing on response frequencies and patterns among the participants. The findings confirm the anticipated benefits of blended learning while uncovering additional advantages. They emphasize the urgent need for Algerian universities to strengthen their infrastructure and resources to support this approach effectively, while also addressing the socio-economic disparities that influence students' access to distance learning.

Keywords: Blended learning, COVID-19, Digital Teaching, Distance Learning, E-Learning, Algerian Higher Education.

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Introduction

COVID-19 has disrupted educational systems worldwide forcing universities to adapt to distance learning modalities. While distance learning has been a prevalent practice in Western institutions, Algerian universities traditionally favored face-to-face instruction. The abrupt transition to digital learning methods carried particular challenges to higher education in Algeria. As the focus shifts from the necessity of digitalization to its effectiveness, exploring strategies to enhance its implementation in the Algerian context becomes paramount.

This study delves into the effectiveness of blended learning, a hybrid approach that combines distance and face-to-face elements in higher education in Algeria.

Blended learning has emerged as a promising approach to address the limitations of purely face-to-face or distance learning; offering flexibility, personalization, and engagement (Graham, Mancilla-Raña, & Lopez, 2013) . In the Algerian context, blended learning holds particular promise as it can bridge the gap between traditional teaching practices and the demands of the digital age. To investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in higher education in Algeria, we conducted a survey where we chose Master students of English- the University of Mascara- . The survey aims to explore their insights, perceptions and experiences with blended learning, focusing on its strengths, weaknesses, and overall impact on their learning outcomes.

The findings provide valuable insights from the potential of blended learning to enhance the quality of education in the Algerian universities. The study's contribution lies in its exploration of blended learning in a specific cultural and educational context, offering practical recommendations for its effective implementation in Algeria. By understanding the perspectives and experiences of Master students in English, we can form educational policies and practices that promote blended learning as a viable and effective approach to teaching and learning in Algerian higher education.

1. Literature review

1.1.Challenges of Digital Learning in Algeria

COVID-19 pandemic has unquestionably been a catalyst motive that contributed in the global embracing of digital learning in higher education. Algeria with its traditional emphasis on face-to-face instruction is a prime example of a country that underwent a rapid shift towards digital pedagogy (Bates, 2019). This presents a unique opportunity to explore the challenges and the opportunities of digital learning in the Algerian context.

Several studies have identified potential roadblocks to effective digital learning implementation in the developing countries. These challenges may be particularly relevant to Algeria:

- Infrastructure and Access: Unequal access to reliable internet connectivity and technological devices can limit student's participation in online learning.
- Faculty Training and Support: instructors' lack of training and support to use digital tools and pedagogical approaches in online environments can hinder the quality of digital learning experiences (Fennour&Chiheb, 2023: P. 258).
- Digital Literacy and Student Support: Students may require additional support in developing digital literacy skills and adapting to online learning environments.

1.2.Enhancing Digital Learning in Algeria

Despite these challenges, the research suggests as well strategies to maintain the effectiveness of digital learning in higher education:

- Investigating the specific challenges faced by Algerian universities in implementing digital learning.
- Exploring successful strategies to enhance the use of digital learning tools in the Algerian context.

• Contributing in the development of a framework for effective digital learning implementation in Algerian higher education.

Through the aforementioned research questions, this article aims to contribute in the ongoing conversation about optimizing digital learning in the wake of the pandemic; focusing mainly on the Algerian university system.

• Context-Specific Development: Digital learning tools and practices should be adapted to the specific needs and resources of Algerian universities.

• Faculty Development Programs: Providing ongoing training and support to develop online courses and using technology effectively is crucial.

• Student-Centered Design: Creating online learning environments that are interactive, engaging, and cater to diverse learning styles can improve student outcomes.

Gaps in Knowledge

While these studies provide valuable insights, a more nuanced understanding of the Algerian context is necessary. This research aims to address this gap by:

2. Digital training solutions

E-learning platforms and resources are increasingly available in Algerian universities. Projects like the IDE @: internet for the development of distance education in Algeria have fostered the creation of electronic libraries, video lecture networks, and online courses (Bacha & Guerroui, 2012). Despite this development, research reveals a need for further improvement in E-learning content and pedagogical approaches to maximize its effectiveness (Bacha & Guerroui, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst in the rapid adoption of technology in educational institutions, particularly in higher education (Kies M & Kies N, 2024). This has led to a renewed focus on various forms of distance learning, including blended learning approaches. While Algerian universities have traditionally followed face-to-face instruction, recent circumstances have necessitated the exploration and implementation of digital learning solutions. Platforms like Dokeos and MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) have facilitated the shift to online learning despite challenges such as accessibility and connectivity issues.

2.1. E-Learning

E-Learning has become a crucial method in the system of the Algerian university where the limitations of traditional face-to-face instruction have been addressed. Despite its peak in France a decade ago, and its expansion in the USA since 2016, E-Learning has gained widespread popularity in Algeria due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has led to significant transformations in the educational system of the universities and teaching methodologies.

Thus, students may receive lectures at home through courseware that is usually hosted on a web server and they may have the access from an E-Learning platform (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2012) such as MOODLE, which is the selected ones at the University of Mascara and many other Algerian Universities.

During lockdown, E-Learning has enabled remote access to distant locations, but also it has disadvantages like high costs of learning materials, internet connection issues, and the quasi–physical separation between the teacher and the learner; in which the emotions, the authority and the human expressiveness that play a large part in teaching are absent (Baklouti, 2003).

Furthermore, alongside E-Learning, there exists social learning, also referred to as E-Learning 2.0, which takes its symbol from the concept of Web 2.0. This evolved iteration of E-Learning emphasizes interaction, enabling learners to transition from passive spectators to active participants, particularly within social networks.

2.2. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses)

The acronym MOOC stands for Massive Open Online Course and was introduced in 2008 by Dave Cormier. Since its popularization in 2012, dubbed "The Year of the MOOC" by the New York Times, MOOCs have reached 101 million learners worldwide (Janssens, 2019). Initially designed by American universities such as Stanford, Harvard, and MIT, MOOCs serve as virtual substitutes for certain on-campus courses, offering free access to lectures by professors from prestigious universities (Charbonneau, 2013).

MOOCs include various resources and activities, such as videos, quizzes, case studies, and synchronous meetings in the form of conference calls or virtual classes (Houillier, 2018). These courses are freely accessible, with platforms like FUN (France Université Numérique), OPEN CLASSROOM, and COURSERA offering thousands of courses in various languages. MOOCs have been particularly appealing in contexts like Algeria, where traditional university fees can be high (Houillier, 2018).

However, the global debate surrounding MOOCs has been polarized. While some view MOOCs as valuable learning resources, others, such as Pascal Engel, critique them as "weapons of mass destruction of knowledge" (Engel, 2013). The accessibility and affordability of MOOCs are particularly relevant in Algeria, but concerns persist regarding their completion rates and the potential replacement of traditional university education (Charbonneau, 2013).

The Algerian context presents a mixed picture regarding the adoption of MOOCs. Some universities, such as the University of Mentouri Constantine 1, have explored their use, while others have been slower to integrate them. Algerian institutions like ENSSEA (National School of Statistics and Applied Economics) and ESI (Higher School of Computer Science) have demonstrated a more proactive approach by incorporating MOOCs into their teaching methodologies.

2.3.Webinars

Webinars, a combination of "web" and "seminar," have become a valuable tool for synchronous learning within blended learning environments. These virtual classrooms allow participants to engage in online training or conferences remotely (Peglion, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Algerian universities, such as the University of Oran 1, effectively utilized webinars to conduct study days and conferences. Webinars typically involve online registration and participation via a web link.

Beyond academia, webinars are widely used in sectors like digital marketing, telecommunications, and auditing. They offer a platform for synchronous and remote training using software or platforms like Webex, Uber Conference, or YouTube Live. Participants can engage through chat functions, polls, and shared documents, which enhance the interactive and engaging nature of the learning experience. Webinars can be recorded, and features like downloadable materials, slide decks, and post-session replays help with accessibility and knowledge retention.

Synchronous learning, a key component of blended learning, allows for real-time interaction between instructors and students. Webinars, as defined by Ally (2008), are online seminars delivered through web conferencing platforms and have proven to be an essential tool for synchronous learning in the Algerian blended learning landscape.

2.3.1. Advantages of Webinars in the Algerian Context:

• Accessibility: Webinars transcend geographical limitations, enabling students to participate from different locations across Algeria, a vast country. This is particularly beneficial for students

who may face challenges attending traditional classroom sessions due to distance or logistical constraints.

• Flexibility: Webinars provide a flexible learning environment. Students can participate in live sessions or access recordings at their convenience through offering diverse learning styles and schedules (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

• Engagement: interactive elements such as polls, Q&A sessions, and breakout rooms have the potential to encourage active student engagement in webinars. This is particularly important in the Algerian context where addressing large class sizes and promoting student engagement can be challenging (Bacha & Guerroui, 2012).

• Expertise: Webinars can connect Algerian students with instructors and experts around the world, enriching their learning experience with diverse perspectives and knowledge sources (Bates, 2019).

2.4.Integration with Blended Learning

Effective integration between webinars and blended learning courses in Algeria requires careful planning and consideration of the specific learning objectives. Webinars can be utilized for:

• Interactive lectures: Delivering course content in a live, engaging format.

• Guest lectures: Inviting international speakers to share expertise.

• Seminars and discussions: Facilitating real-time discussions and interactive activities.

2.4.1.Addressing Challenges:

• Technological infrastructure: Unequal access to reliable internet connectivity across Algeria remains a concern. Efforts to expand broadband access and address the digital divide are crucial to maximizing the reach of webinars.

• Faculty development: Provide training in the Algerian faculties through an effective use of webinars as a pedagogical tool can enhance student learning outcomes (Bacha & Guerroui, 2012).

2.4.2.Blended Learning Models:

Blended learning or hybrid learning is a type of learning that combines different modes of training. The term "blended" means that face-to-face teaching is led by electronic tools (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)(2012). Intriguingly, in blended learning, digital tools permit to test learners before and after face to face training and assess their training as well (Lhommeau & Hernandez, 2024).

Different approaches to blended learning exist: the flow program, which is akin to traditional training, integrates online learning. Another approach is the core-and-spoke model, which revolves around a central course supplemented by various materials, and the network model. The main difference between core-and-spoke model and network model is that there is no core shared experiences in network model. (Khor and al., 2020: P.505)

According to Clayton Christensen Institute researcher Michael B. Horn, there are four popular blended learning models, which are as follows:

- The "Rotation model": Students rotate between educational workstations inside and outside the classroom.
- The "Flexible model": The main source of content is the internet while the teacher provides individualized help in case of need.
- The "A la carte model": Students select online courses at home or at school in addition to traditional courses.
- The "Enriched virtual model": Teaching is mostly done at distance and is combined with ad hoc courses at school (Garcia, 2017).

3.Breakthrough of digital training

Globally, the implementation of digital training approaches has accelerated due to COVID-19. Universities in Algeria have embraced online learning environments like Moodle to maintain educational continuity. Technology has profoundly altered people's lives worldwide, influencing various spheres of endeavor, including shopping behaviors. E-commerce and online payment systems like E-Draham have seen tremendous advancements.

To overcome the limitations caused by lockdowns, many economic actors adopted teleworking in their businesses. Higher education is likely one of the industries most impacted during the pandemic. To ensure pedagogical continuity, all in-person courses were replaced with online courses hosted on the Moodle platform. As a result, students in Algeria could access their courses, review documentation, and communicate with their teachers with just a click.

3.1. Collaboration for Effective Digital Training

The successful implementation of a blended learning environment necessitates collaboration among various stakeholders. This includes instructional designers, subject-matter experts (SMEs), programmers, and web designers. Each group plays a critical role:

- Instructional designers: Develop the overall learning experience, including instructional strategies, assessments, and learning activities.
- Subject-matter experts (SMEs): Provide knowledge and expertise to ensure the accuracy and depth of course content.
- Programmers: Build the technical infrastructure for the online learning platform, ensuring functionality and accessibility.
- Web designers: Focus on the user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) of the platform, creating an engaging and user-friendly environment.

The ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) offers a valuable framework for this collaborative process. It emphasizes the importance of incorporating feedback throughout the design and development stages, resulting in effective learner-centered blended learning experiences (Nichols & Greer, 2016).

3.2. Key Factors of Digital Training Success

Digital training requires intensive labor and collaboration across multiple specialties, such as multimedia, IT, and technology. Subject-matter experts contribute course content, while instructional designers develop storyboards, digital assets, strategies, and course objectives. Web designers and programmers construct interactive elements, produce multimedia components, and enhance the user interface of learning platforms.

Through ergo-pedagogy, ergonomic engineers improve multimedia learning materials and interfaces, contributing to the success of educational design. The ADDIE model is the recommended framework for creating in-person and virtual learning environments. It facilitates ongoing assessment and modification to meet the demands of the target audience and training objectives.

Ensuring the quality of distant learning experiences necessitates regular feedback and a commitment to continuous improvement.

4.Research Methodology

This research investigates the effectiveness of blended learning in Algerian higher education with a specific focus on Master students of Translation-University Mustapha Stambouli – Mascara. The research aims to explore the students' experiences with blended learning, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and provide insights to improve its implementation in the Algerian context.

4.1.Participants

To realize this, 37 participants were selected (first year master student of translation) – University of Mustapha Stambouli- Mascara. The sample consisted of 6 male students and 31 female students with an average age of 23 years old. All participants held a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Mascara.

A convenience sampling approach was used due to the small size of the target population (i.e., all first-year Master students of translation at the university). The entire class was invited to participate, and their willingness to contribute facilitated the data collection process.

4.2.Data Collection

Data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire distributed to the participants after an Interpreting class. The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions. Ten of them were direct questions designed to gather information about the students' experiences with blended learning methods, their attitudes towards technology use in education and their perceptions of the overall effectiveness of blended learning. The questionnaire completion time was approximately 45 minutes.

To gain a deeper understanding of these experiences and perceptions, a survey entitled "A Survey on Technology Access, Attitudes, and Perceptions of Distance Learning" was contributed to the participants following the Interpreting class. The following table presents the specific survey questions employed:

A survey on Technology Access, Attitudes, and Perceptions of Distance Learning

	Questions	No	Yes
1	Do you have a computer?	02	35
2	Do you have a smartphone?	02	35
3	Do you have any computer skills?	10	25
4	Do you use the internet easily?	00	37
5	Did you visit the course platform before the distance learning period?	27	10
6	Are you satisfied with the courses presented on the university's website?	30	07
7	Did you feel supported enough by the university during this period?	30	07
8	Did you receive training in the use of the platform?	36	01
9	Has your level been impacted by distance learning?	10	27
10	Would you prefer to continue with distance learning in the next academic year?	31	06

11. How did you access the lessons?

a. Computer: 14

b. Smartphone: 22

c. Other method: 01 (Did not access)

12. How would you rate your understanding of the lessons?

a. Good: 03

b. Moderate: 29

c. Poor: 05

13. What were the main technical difficulties you encountered?

a. Overloaded platform

b. Difficult connectivity

c. Unavailable website

d. Lengthy downloads

5.Results and Discussion

This section will be concerned with stating the results and then discussing them. It will be divided into two sections, the first will be devoted to interpreting the 10 direct question answers, and the second section will analyse the answers to the open-ended questions.

Ownership of computers, and smartphones : 35 out of 37 students, or an overwhelming majority, reported owning a computer and a smartphone. This reveals that the study participants are highly connected to one another through technology.

Computer proficiency: of 35 pupils, a relative plurality (25 out of 35) reported being proficient in using computers; while a sizable portion, (10 out of 35) acknowledged are not. This implies that the participants' levels of computer proficiency vary.

Internet use: Every student claimed to use Internet flawlessly, indicating a general understanding of this research and communication tool.

Using the platform before teaching : The overwhelming majority of students (27 out of 37) did not visit the platform before the start of teaching, which may indicate that they were not engaged with the course material beforehand or that the relevant administrative department was not encouraging them to use it.

Satisfaction and support from the university: A significant minority (7 out of 37) of students said they were satisfied with the courses offered by the university and felt sufficiently supported; whereas ,the majority (30 out of 37) indicated discontent and a sense of being unsupported. These findings suggest that there may be a need for a room to development.

Improved level through distance learning: A relative majority (27 out of 37) of students believe that their level has increased as a result of distance learning; while, 10 disagree. This implies that there are chances for considerable development for certain individuals even in the face of the difficulties connected with distant learning.

Preference for using the platform to study next year: of the 37 students surveyed, just 6 of them said they would rather use the platform to learn next year. The vast majority; however, (31 of 37) said they would rather use other learning modalities. This emphasizes how crucial it is to vary teaching strategies in order to accommodate students' requirements and preferences.

Regarding the open-ended questions, the data show numbers of intriguing patterns regarding participant technical challenges, comprehension of the lectures, and availability of online courses. First, it was noted that while a smaller percentage of students (14 out of 37) used a computer, the majority of students (22 out of 37) accessed the courses via a mobile device. This could indicate a predilection for the ease and mobility that smartphones provide, as well as the devices' improved Internet accessibility. It should be mentioned that one person did not access the courses through these methods; this could be for a variety of reasons, including a preference for alternative study techniques or issues with connectivity.

Secondly, with regard to course comprehension, an overwhelming majority (29 out of 37) of participants rated their comprehension as average, while only three people rated their comprehension as good and five as poor. These findings cast doubt on the efficacy of the given content's clarity as well as the effectiveness of the online teaching style. It is plausible that modifying the manner in which lessons are imparted or the approach in which students are individually observed could enhance the quality of learning.

Thirdly, the majority of participants' technical issues are related to the platform itself; these issues include overload, connection issues, times when the website is offline, and lengthy downloads. These technical issues can significantly affect how well students learn online by impeding their ability to access learning resources or by interfering with their study sessions. More work to fix these technical problems and to guarantee a seamless user experience may boost students' E-learning efficacy and pleasure.

To sum up, analysis and interpretation of the questionnaire results show that students appreciate distance learning; since it has allowed them to engage with their lecturers and fully

comprehend the material, two essential components of effective teaching and learning. However, we must provide the means to realize our goals. If the Algerian university wants to improve teaching, especially in distance learning, it must establish a high-quality technical foundations and a high-quality connection. Additionally, it must constantly consider the less fortunate social environment of a sizable portion of students who either live in predominantly white areas or cannot afford to purchase a computer or tablet.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the indispensable role of digital learning in maintaining the continuity of education. While distance learning offers substantial benefits, its true potential emerges when seamlessly integrated with traditional face-to-face instruction within a well-structured blended learning framework. To address the diverse and evolving needs of students in the digital age, Algerian institutions must prioritize continuous innovation and adaptation to emerging educational paradigms. Equipping themselves with necessary material and technical resources is essential for achieving their ambitious goals and fostering an inclusive, high-quality educational environment.

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